



CHOREOGRAPHED CONSENSUS: THE STIFLING OF DISSENT AT CRISPRCON 2019



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Last week, we attended the annual **CRISPRcon** hosted by Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands. The conference was marketed as a not-for-profit event offering ‘a unique forum in which a broad selection of diverse voices come together to discuss the future of **CRISPR** and related gene editing technologies’. In practice, however, CRISPRcon 2019 was a cleverly choreographed **greenwashing** rally, funded by corporations such as

Bayer and Editas Medicine, industry associations such as Plantum and United Soybean Board, and research centres such as the Innovative Genomics Institute and the Flemish Institute for Biotechnology.

Voices critical of CRISPR, along with other techniques in what has come to be known as synthetic biology, were outcasts. Out of 53 plenary speakers, only two of us and one other (an organic farmer), raised any critical issues about the technology. Civil society participants later issued a statement to condemn their tokenistic 'inclusion' in the event.

In a similar vein, the conference's app-based system of audience participation was geared towards marginalising criticism. CRISPRcon's panellists only addressed those questions that received 'likes' from the almost universally pro-CRISPR audience. Critical voices were thus effectively silenced at CRISPRcon 2019. No debate between a diverse range of contending voices was fostered. Instead, in a form of greenwashing, speakers promoted CRISPR by mobilising the language of sustainability and democracy.

SUSTAINABILITY FRAMED

Speakers argued that CRISPR's agricultural applications would help reduce the use of pesticides that are harmful for the environment. It would also tackle droughts, low productivity and hunger, particularly among small farmers in Africa and South Asia.

All potential and actual adverse impacts of genetic technologies, such as the threats to agrobiodiversity, were ignored. Nor was a reference made to the ethics and politics of profits to be made by agribusiness corporations from selling to poor people in

monopolistic markets, driven by patented technologies.

On health, presenters at CRISPRcon claimed the technology would potentially treat diseases that have been neglected or difficult to address till now. But a discussion of the **potential damage** to human genes from CRISPR gene editing, and of other uncertainties, was largely left out.

Any flaws of CRISPR-based technologies were deemed to be temporary, because all technological development worked through a gradual 'self-correcting process'. It was claimed that CRISPR technologies, such as gene drive organisms, would be perfected by reacting to problems as they were encountered after release.

Anyone who raised concerns about such experimentation with CRISPR was, according to the speaker representing the European Commission, a 'Luddite' from one of the 'loud-mouthed NGOs'.

DEMOCRACY CAPTURED

To help people accept CRISPR, some speakers used the rhetoric of 'democracy in knowledge production'. They argued that scientists not only needed to adopt CRISPR storylines that are likely to chime with 'the public', they also needed to move beyond the '**knowledge deficit**' model of science communication.

Using participatory techniques, scientists were called upon to ensure public support for CRISPR applications from early stages of knowledge production. CRISPR proponents also suggested engaging religious leaders, social scientists and ethicists, to reach a consensus among the public about what their 'fundamental' concerns were: from tackling climate change to eradicating malaria

and hunger. Such a consensus could then be deployed to promote CRISPR as the most effective way to address the issues.

This choreographed consensus could also be used to lower the bar of regulation and for countering decisions such as that made by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in **July 2018**, which had concluded that outputs of gene editing should be treated as Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and therefore **regulated** under the **GMO directive**.

The ECJ's decision was decried and lamented nearly unanimously at CRISPRcon 2019. For example, a **Syngenta** representative (who was formerly at Bayer) argued that the ruling slows down the process of bringing seeds with new traits to the market. A **BBC presenter and science writer** called the ECJ decision anti-science and anti-humanity.

Several speakers suggested that people's knowledge and beliefs could be harnessed. However, their unstated assumption seemed to be that these perspectives would be re-constituted and channelled in the service of CRISPR.

To this end, democratic mechanisms such as co-development models and public consultations were promoted as **tools of power** to choreograph consensus. Other tools such as social media and mobile phones were cited as useful to gain widespread public acceptance of CRISPR.

NURTURING DISSENT

In unequal societies, domination is achieved also through knowledge and technology. As the **Luddites** and **others**

demonstrated, dissent is necessary for democratic processes to evolve.

Dissent here is not just a moral or ethical reflection, but rather an epistemological and ontological divergence that allows other possible futures to be realised. In these alternative futures, people may be supported to pursue holistic practices, rather than adopt reductionist technologies, for addressing the many socio-ecological challenges facing us.

Dissent as a core component of democracy is directed not only against the 'bad' uses of ostensibly neutral techno-sciences, but also against the reductionist content of corporate-controlled science and technology. Such techno-sciences are, after all, geared towards extracting resources and maximising profit.

Dissent must also go beyond modern techno-scientific rationality. It must promote knowledge diversity, by protecting and nurturing 'indigenous' and 'traditional' knowledge practices beyond modernity. If we recognise that such practices have sustained the majority of biodiversity around the world, their protection and nurturing might be necessary for realising real sustainability. And for such practices to reproduce themselves, dissent against corporate extractivism is critical.

Dissent represents hope, amidst the coercive capitalist forces encroaching on our life support systems. More than ever, dissent is now a vital democratic resource for sustainability, realised through knowledge diversity and genuinely grassroots-led forms of democracy.



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